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ABSTRACT

This handbook demonstrates how to make and present travel slides for the language and culture course with maximum effectiveness. There are six basic rules for the teacher to follow: (1) fill the frame; (2) suppress your ego; keep yourself and your relatives out of your picture; (3) leave the audience wishing for more slides, not fewer; (4) vary your viewpoints; (5) don't show slides with flaws; and (6) know your projection equipment. An effective picture show should be able to communicate without words. Narration should never be used to compensate for bad slides. A number of illustrations are provided as examples of photographic composition for a variety of subjects. (Author/CFM)

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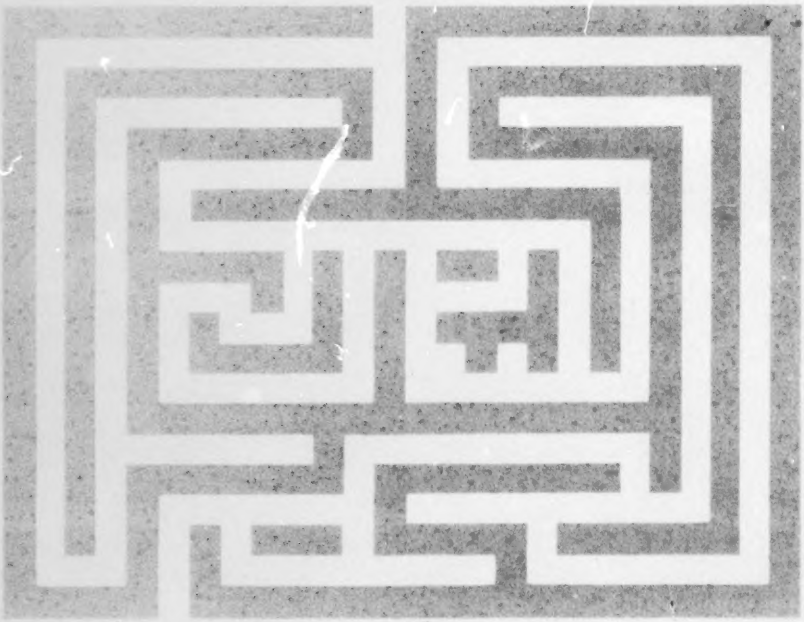
Projecting a Better Image: Slides and the Foreign Language Teacher

Alan Galt



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PROJECTING A BETTER IMAGE:

SLIDES AND THE FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHER

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CAL·ERIC/CLL Series on Languages and Linguistics

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PROJECTING A BETTER IMAGE:

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"Just one more tray."

Few students even hear the remark. In the darkened classroom, the teacher is unaware that most of what has been said for the past half hour has been ignored. The students are daydreaming, doodling, or dozing.

, this your slide show? Could these be your students?

With today's automatic cameras, every traveler is a potential amateur photographer. Most problems of focus and exposure have been eliminated by high-speed lenses and automatic exposure control. Even without experience, the camera owner can achieve slides that are technically acceptable. But it takes more than a camera to make good pictures. The photographer and the equipment are a team. The person behind the lens is responsible still for the selection of subjects, the quality of composition, and the perspective of the camera.

Many amateurs do not realize that even professional photographers, who are supposed to make no technical errors, discard far more exposures than they save. Taking poor pictures is forgivable, since so many circumstances are beyond the photographer's control. But showing poor pictures is inexcusable.

This handbook will demonstrate how to make and present travel slides for the language and culture course with maximum effectiveness. It is not the point of the handbook to tell the language teacher when or how to incorporate travel slides into the syllabus, since most teachers who have traveled with a camera are aware of its usefulness as a teaching aid. Rather, the purpose is to suggest that by means of applying principles of selection, technical excellence is within the reach of even the amateur photographer with inexpensive equipment, and that teachers should strive for the same degree of excellence in preparing slide shows as in choosing textbooks. Today's young adults have watched so much television of unsurpassed technical quality--even though the programming may be less than outstanding--that they are not very tolerant of inept slide showmanship from the amateur teacher/photographer.

More Effective Slides

Many of the suggestions in this section are equally applicable to the moment of picture taking or to the later phase of sorting and editing for a show. Slide showing, whether for the entertainment of friends or for the education of foreign language students, is an art in which the practitioner has a second chance: errors in shooting can be corrected by judicious culling.

The key to pictures that are pleasing is good composition. Composition depends on the proper balance of shapes and lines, textures and colors. By controlling these four aspects of composition, the photographer, like the painter and the sculptor, can determine the message that the audience will receive.

Rule 1: Fill the frame.

All too often, the amateur photographer fails to move in close enough to the subject. The result is a center of interest that is too small in proportion to its surroundings. Sometimes the environment is merely blank space; at other times it may be filled by a multitude of secondary subjects which compete for attention. The remedy is to move in closer to the main subject, so that it occupies almost the entire frame. A practical rule is that the longest dimension of the primary subject should fill two-thirds to three-fourths of the longest dimension of the picture. This usually yields a composition whose proportions are harmonious, and has the added benefit of insuring that a maximum of detail will be visible to the viewer. The amateur should take some cues from professional camera operators. Note how close together the actors are placed for television shots that show two people in the front seat of a car: they sit shoulder-to-shoulder, so that the camera can move in tightly to pick up details of expression without wasting space. There is no blank area between the two subjects to spoil their interrelationship.

Composition with Human Subjects

Foreign travel presents countless opportunities to photograph people working, enjoying themselves, and going about their everyday affairs. Teachers of foreign languages and cultures are sensitive to variations in lifestyles and are conscious of occasions for saving photographic illustrations of these variations. How can amateurs make their pictures tell these stories as effectively as possible? Here are some suggestions for coping with several different circumstances that involve human subjects.

Groups engaged in a lively activity (playing soccer, performing a dance, haggling in the market, etc.) should be framed tightly so that no more than three or four individuals, who are clearly involved with one another, completely fill the picture (Fig. 1).

Note that these examples are of activities which engage most or all of the body. To understand how effective this close framing is, consider how it is used in telecasting sports events, variety entertainment, and talk shows. In baseball, the batter, catcher, and umpire are often shown in a tight cluster with the pitcher; a telephoto camera looks over the latter's shoulder from center field. Similarly, the remote cameras that provide football's instant replays focus only on the ballcarrier and the players in his immediate vicinity. On musical variety shows, the most frequent shots show the lead singer alone or accompanied only by the primary guest stars. On the late show, the host sits across from only one or two guests at a time; the camera angles clearly show facial expressions and hand gestures.

Fig. 1: Framing an active group. From a close camera position, three or four individuals completely fill the scene.

Other situations or persons that call for this type of framing include manual workers in agriculture and construction; persons walking or talking on the street; passengers boarding a bus; musicians; and tourists with most of the people with whom they come in regular contact, e.g., waiters, porters, customs officers, venders (Fig. 2).

Individuals doing hand work (sewing, pottery, basket making, etc.) should be framed much more tightly. In these instances, the center of interest is the handwork itself: the object or the process of creating it. Here a head-to-lap shot is appropriate (Fig. 3). All sorts of crafts and trades should be shown in this type of tight framing, which permits a close look at the details of work such as jewelry, lacework, leathercrafts, or instruments. This type of framing is also applicable to persons reading, eating, writing, or just sitting.

Placement and orientation of human subjects are just as important considerations as the selection of framing. In the early days of

2A

2B

Fig. 2: Close framing of small action groups. A. Waiter and guest in a restaurant. B. Passengers boarding a bus.

Fig. 3: Close framing of an artisan at work. In this close-up, important details of the face and the work are clearly visible.

photographic portraiture, the subjects were usually posed in very stiff, rigidly symmetrical settings. This style was dictated more by technology than by taste: the slow photographic emulsions of those times required relatively long exposures, so the models were required to assume solid positions that they could hold without moving. Today a stiffly posed photograph seems sterile, and the finest portrait photographers search constantly for new ways to express the individuality and vitality of their subjects. The amateur can borrow a page from the professionals' handbook by experimenting with asymmetrical balancing. Here are some proven fundamentals:

- Center the torso of the subject on a vertical line that is conspicuously off-center--a line that divides the frame into proportions of approximately two-fifths and three-fifths.

- Be sure that the subject is facing neither head-on nor in full profile, but at a medium angle toward the larger space of the frame and looking into the picture, not out of it. This is what the professionals call a "three-quarter view (Fig. 4)."

Fig. 4: Full-length portraits are appropriate for showing unusual stature, bearing, or costume.

- To achieve a natural, comfortable expression, the subject should normally be engaged with something that is visible in the picture and should be looking at that object. This informalizes the picture and puts the viewer at ease by making the subject appear at ease (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5: The craftsman's eyes and hands are engaged in his work, not posed for the camera.

There are exceptions to the principle above. Sometimes it may be effective to draw the viewer into a direct relationship with the person in the picture. Street venders, tour guides, waiters, or railroad conductors will seem to be addressing the viewer directly if they are photographed while looking directly into the camera (Fig. 6). An alternation of such perspectives permits the viewer to enjoy the photographer's travels as a participant--to share in the feeling of having "been there."

Fig. 6: Looking into the camera, the vender offers her wares directly to the viewers and involves them in the experience.

Frontal eye contact is also a standard technique of formal portrait photography. Formal portraiture, however, has little place in the repertoire of the traveling teacher/photographer, to whom people are less interesting in themselves than in relation to their activities and environments.

Full-length, standing photographs of human subjects should normally be avoided, except to illustrate distinctions of stature or dress. Under most circumstances, the face, with its nuances of expression, is a far more interesting and informative target for the camera than the rest of the human body. Most amateurs, unaware of this, need to develop the technique of tight framing for human photography, so that the visual message will include all the details of the subject's expression. Consider how much more intimate Figure 7 is than Figure 4.

If human subjects are to be cut, the photographer must follow rules as carefully as the surgeon. For head portraits, the best place to cut is in a narrow zone between the shoulders and the breastline (see Fig. 7); this leaves enough of the torso to prevent the impression of decapitation, while at the same time avoiding the suggestiveness of a truncated bosom. Larger views can reach to the waist or mid-thigh, but no lower. (Longer views should be genuine full-length

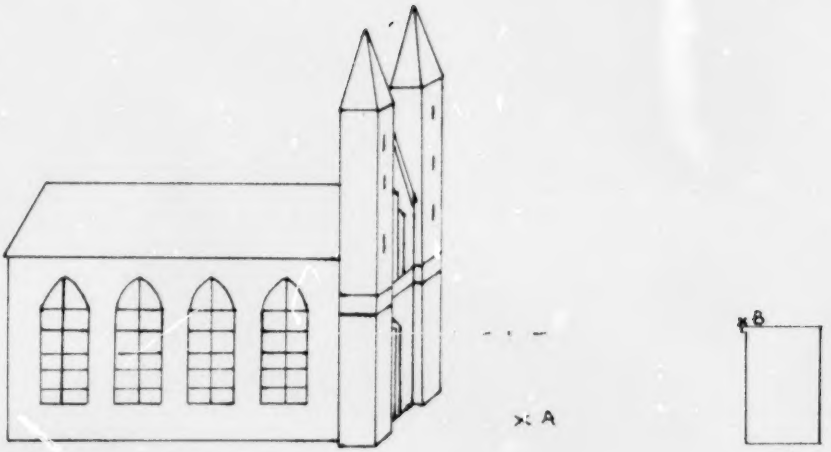
Fig. 7: Head portraits are generally best when the face is the most interesting feature.

portraits and show the subject standing on stable footing.) In any case, if the arms or legs are to be cut, they should not be cropped at the natural joints, since this tends to suggest amputation, but in the middle of the limbs instead.

Composition with Architectural Subjects

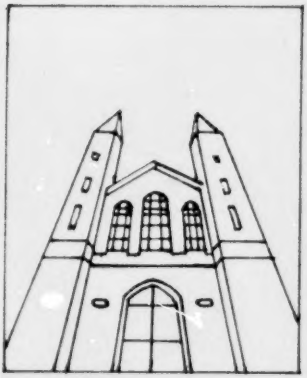
The most important requisite of architectural photography, and often the most difficult to achieve, is to avoid unintentional distortion. While the Tower of Pisa may lean, the Tower of London may not. While it is proper for the Pyramid of Cheops and the Eiffel Tower to rise from a broad base to a slender pinnacle, the twin towers of Notre Dame de Paris ascend on vertical, parallel walls. Why do tall buildings, in photographs taken by amateurs, so often seem to lean over backwards or recede to a point in the sky? Because the photographer has failed to allow for perspective.

Perspective is more than just viewpoint. To the artist, perspective means the technique of demonstrating depth by making some objects seem smaller than others. The camera, as a precise optical instrument, performs this technique with great exactness: the dimensions of objects on film are in precise inverse proportion to their distance from the camera's focal plane. The same phenomenon which causes the lanes of a superhighway to appear to converge on the horizon will cause a cathedral to appear to be falling over backwards when it is photographed from ground level at a position near its base. What is the remedy? In a few fortunate situations, a nearby hill or tall building will provide a viewpoint approximately half as high as the building which is to be photographed (Fig. 8). But all too often, the crowded surroundings interfere with a clear view. Here the photographer must be satisfied with a more distant



8A

8B



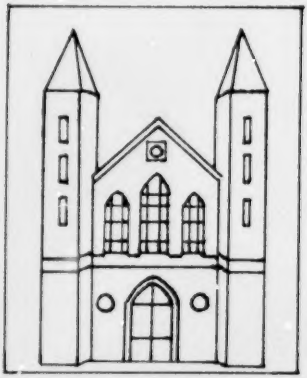


Fig. 8: Two perspectives. Cameras at positions A (ground level in front of the cathedral) and B (on a neighboring building half as high as the cathedral façade) will produce the views illustrated in frames 8A and 8B.

overview which shows how the landmark towers above its surroundings (Fig. 9), and confine close-up photography to details of architectural features at ground level (Fig. 10). Whenever the photographer leans back and tilts the camera upward, the subject in the resulting photograph will appear to lean away in the opposite direction. This gives an impression of instability which is troubling to the viewer.

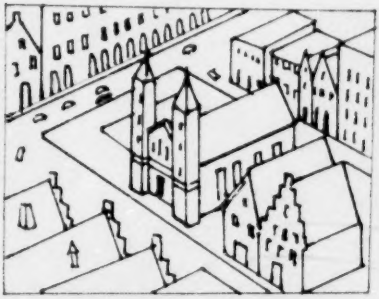


Fig. 9: The cathedral in its surroundings.

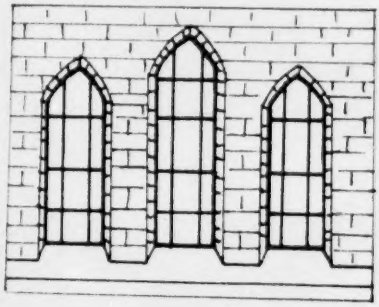


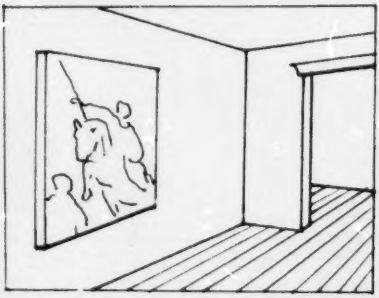
Fig. 10: The cathedral: close-up of architectural details.

When photographing architectural subjects, it is essential that the camera be level. Any tilting will introduce distortion, as we have seen, and any flaw in the vertical lines of a building will suggest that the structure is about to topple. To prevent this effect, the photographer must orient the camera on a real or imagined vertical line as close as possible to the center of the frame. No other line than this center vertical is significant for orienting the camera (Fig. 11).

If your camera takes pictures with a rectangular format, as in 35mm systems, it should go without saying that subjects that are essentially horizontal when viewed from the camera's position should be photographed with the camera in its horizontal orientation, while tall subjects should be taken in the vertical view. This is consistent with the basic principle of economizing on precious image space by filling the frame. Modern automatic cameras of the Instamatic type take this decision out of the photographer's hands by picturing everything in a square format. (Many photographers dislike this square frame because of its stolid symmetry.)

When you use your traveling companions to illustrate the scale of buildings or other large objects, do not try to identify both the human and the inanimate subjects in the picture at the same time. Aunt Daisy under the portico of the White House will be too small to be recognizable. She should not stand facing the camera, but

11A



11B

Fig. 11: Incorrect and correct orientation of an architectural feature (interior of a room). In 11A the camera is aligned on a false horizontal at the base of the wall; in 11B a true vertical line near the center of the frame is used for alignment.

instead should walk away from the camera and toward the entrance, an anonymous tourist who should never be identified when the slide is shown. (No one needs proof that Aunt Daisy was once at the White House, which is all that identification would achieve.)

Rule 2: Suppress your ego; keep yourself and your relatives out of your pictures.

On the other hand, companions can be used in many ways to improve the foreground of travel pictures. If an empty cobblestone plaza is unavoidable because of the camera distance needed to embrace an entire building (as, for instance, at Versailles), then one or two people can be placed off center in the middle foreground to break up the open expanse, as long as they are facing toward--and relating to--either the main subject or each other, not the camera. For example, a companion can be purchasing flowers, a newspaper, or an admission ticket; another in a grandiose natural setting (the rim of the Grand Canyon or the Gornergrat observation terrace near the Matterhorn), can be looking at the scenery through binoculars, or under the shade of a hand, or while referring to a map. As long as the humans are in harmony with the main subject, they can contribute to the composition rather than detract from it. But it is always a mistake to try to take portraits of companions against large-scale backgrounds.

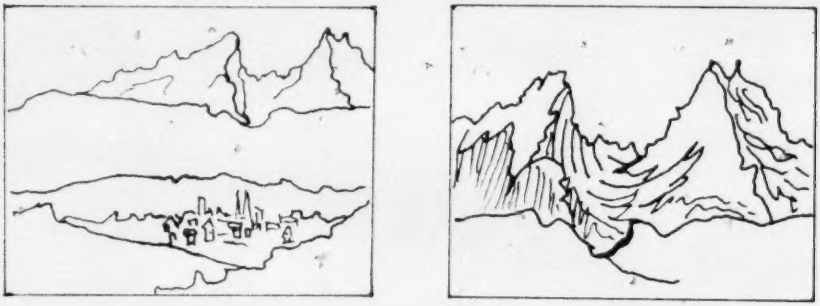
Composition with Small Subjects

Animals, flowers, museum artifacts, handcrafts, signs with lettering, details of architectural carving and statuary, and other small

subjects should be photographed from as close up as possible, so that no detail is lost. As with other themes, a good rule is to let the longest dimension of the subject fill two-thirds to three-fourths of the frame.

Composition with Large Subjects

The mind and the eye work together to exclude extraneous visual stimuli. Two completely automatic mechanisms, focus and field selection, permit us to limit our attention to a minute area in a vast visual field or expand it to embrace a much larger picture. For this reason, we are able to make out tremendous detail at great distances with the naked eye. This fact, combined with our experiential knowledge that mountains, waterfalls, ocean liners, and pyramids are massive forms, cause us to be awed by their grandeur even when we see them from some distance away. Mont St. Michel is a marvelous spectacle, even from far across the fields; so is Chichén-Itzá from the air, or Neuschwanstein Castle from the plain below, or the Statue of Liberty from the Battery. Why do amateur photographs of these wonders so often fail to convey their grandeur? Because the common camera is not capable of selecting the breadth of its field of view, unless interchangeable lenses or a zoom lens are used. If Popocatépetl is only one-tenth as wide as the frame outline in your viewfinder, then you are too far away for the picture to be effective. No matter how much you may be impressed by the mountain, when you project the image later, Popocatépetl will only occupy one-tenth of the width of your screen. Here, as always, the remedy is to take the photograph from a closer viewpoint or to substitute a telephoto lens (Fig. 12).



12A 12B

Fig. 12: From ten miles away, a mountain is less impressive (12A) unless a telephoto lens is used (12B). The camera, unlike the human eye, does not "zoom in" on a narrow field of view in order to interpret the grandeur of a large but distant subject.

Special care must be given to the relationships of major spaces in landscape pictures, where there may be no single distinctive subject that occupies the center of the image. "Creative asymmetry" should rule the composition: avoid centering any major visual reference such as the horizon or a strong vertical figure such as a tree. A frame that is bisected by any pronounced horizonal or vertical line tends to look sterile, whereas off-center placement, if properly balanced in terms of shapes and shades, will lead the viewer's eye smoothly to all the points of interest in the picture. Here are two effective formulae to remedy common abuses of the natural horizon:

(1) To show an expansive landscape, where the interest is in the progressive layout from the foreground to the background, the horizon should be placed in the upper third of the frame (Fig. 13).

(2) Where the main subject is a tree, bush, building, person, or other object in the foreground, the camera should be held low enough so that the natural horizon will lie in the lower part of the frame. Then the main subject will stand out against the uncluttered background of the sky (Fig. 14).

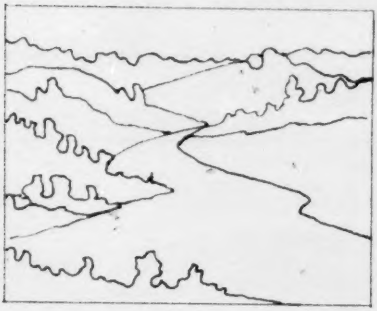


Fig. 13: Landscape expanse calls for an elevated horizon.

Fig. 14: Landscape with foreground interest. With the horizon lowered, the sky provides a clean background for the nearer subjects.

More Effective Shows

The second, and more important, phase of the slide photographer's art begins when the film is returned from the processing laboratory. Now the photographer's role changes to that of editor and projectionist. The sins of the photographer can be redeemed by the editor,

if substandard pictures are discarded or modified to bring out their merits and suppress their weaknesses. Still more crucial than the selection of the slides that will be used is their organization into a coherent and self-contained show.

The "Classical Unities": Time, Place, and Action

To be an effective adjunct to the teaching of a foreign language and culture, slide shows must not overreach the attention span of the audience. In the classroom setting, shows should be confined to 10-15 minutes and offered in conjunction with some other activity. The correct dosage of teacher-made slides may vary from as few as five slides to as many as fifty, but should seldom exceed this number. Twenty-five to thirty slides on a unified subject generally make an attractive package.

Rule 3: Leave the audience wishing for more slides, not fewer.

Trying to cover too many topics or too many locales is a mistake that is sometimes committed in order to avoid the inconvenience of setting up the equipment on additional occasions. But if viewers are presented with too many changes of scene in the context of a single showing, they will be likely to lose track of the subjects and their interrelationships. Here the best answer is to suffer the inconvenience and carry the projector into the classroom several times. If this is truly impractical, then a compromise solution is to break the single showing up into topical or geographical subgroupings, separated by summary discussions for which the lights are turned up.

Imaginative Organization

A typical travelogue begins with a sequence that takes the viewers from the port of departure to the port of entry, escorts them through customs and immigration and into the first night's hotel, shows them around the main cities and the provinces in the sequence of the traveler's actual itinerary, and then leads them aboard the airplane for the trip back home. Audiences are tired of this treatment! Why not experiment with breaking up the collection into numerous brief shows, each with a sharp thematic focus instead of a geographical progression? Here are some examples for the teacher of foreign culture, each of which can be illustrated excitingly with no more than fifteen to twenty slides:

Cities

Landscape variations

Businesses

Transportation

Signs

Occupations

Recreation

Familiar tourist locales

Illustrations of differences in daily life

(Not examples of the "quaint" and "folksy," but genuine distinctions in the everyday patterns of living. Items from West Germany might include a street scene with bedding airing on the windowsills, a close-up of a 220-volt plug and socket, a flow-through water heater, the unisex restroom in a cheap hotel, the public market, a municipal streetcar, and the traffic mirrors that help motorists avoid collisions at blind corners.)

Variety of Pacing and Structure

A steady pace of delivery, like a monotonous tone in music, will put the viewer to sleep. Keep the attention of your audience by varying the pacing. One way to do this is to alternate groups of slow-changing, extensively narrated slides with a number of fast-shifting, self-explanatory ones.

The audience should also be treated to visual variety: an intermixture of close-ups and long shots, of active and static subjects, of pictures with and without human subjects, serves to vary the flavor of the presentation and continually whet the viewer's appetite. The visual progression is a technique that deserves to be mentioned here: a complex subject can be shown first in a distant overview and then in a sequence of two or three additional slides that focus progressively closer on the main subject (Fig. 15). The opposite is also possible: a regression that begins with a detail shot and then backs off to show how the detail fits into its surroundings.

Rule 4: Vary your viewpoints.

Some Common Flaws in Travel Slides

Certain flaws are excusable and should not prevent the inclusion of a slide whose subject is indispensable to the structure of the show. The following flaws may be excused, if no more than one or two slides with these faults are included in a single showing:

- Slight underexposure or overexposure
- Slight "softness" of focus (not blur from an unsteady camera)

- Imperfect spatial composition
- Truncated subject (e.g., weathervane cropped from church spire)
- Pictures of the photographer or the photographer's family (unless these pictures also have cultural significance)

15A

15B

15C

Fig. 15: One type of visual progression: overview (15A), medium detail (15B), close detail (15C).

The following are fatal flaws. Under no circumstances should slides with any of these faults ever be shown outside the circle of the family:

- Partial obstruction by camera case or photographer's hand
- Photographer visible as foreground shadow or as reflection in a window or mirror in the background (unless these effects are intended for comic purposes)
- Major underexposure or overexposure
- Damage such as scratches, stains, light streaks, or fingerprints
- Bad focus
- Double exposure
- Double or blurred outlines caused by camera jiggle or by exposure at too slow a shutter speed
- Tilted camera, evident in the lack of a true horizontal or vertical reference
- Pictures in which the viewer and the photographer perceive different subjects. Perhaps you remember being shown a very satisfactory picture of a weathered, gnarled stump, which was spoiled by the photographer's remark: "I took a picture of this stump because a raccoon had just run behind it."
- Pictures with no center of interest. One friend's slide show of travels in England included one vast homogeneous gray-green expanse with one tiny white dot. The photographer offered the clarification: "This is a picture of a sheep grazing on the moor."
- Pictures of the airplane on which the traveler embarked. We have all seen airplanes by now.
- Views from the airplane window. From six miles up, Provence cannot be distinguished from Pennsylvania.

Rule 5: Don't show slides with flaws.

Avoiding Breakdowns in the Show

Technical failures can embarrass the projectionist and aggravate the viewers. To minimize the risk of breakdowns, both the room and the equipment should be checked carefully ahead of time. The best position for the screen and the projector should be determined by experimentation. Will an extension cord be needed? Will the outlet still be live when the lights are switched off?

Are you entirely familiar with the projector? Can you find the switch and the focus control, even in the dark? Do you have a spare bulb on hand? (Without a spare, your show may be doomed. Projector bulbs are short-lived, and fail without warning.)

Run once through the complete show. Does it "flow"? Does it deliver the intended message? Are any slides inverted or reversed? (Occasional reversal of slides will necessitate frequent refocusing and is especially conspicuous where writing is visible. Look closely: are the cars driving on the proper side of the street?)

If the show runs without problems in your private screening, you can count on its success before an audience.

Rule 6: Know your projection equipment.

Conclusion

An effective picture show should be able to communicate without words. Narration may enhance the message, and it can serve to identify the specific subjects, but it should not be used to compensate for bad slides. The photographer should never have to tell the audience: "I'm sorry about the...in this picture," or "I took this one because...." The reason for the picture should be self-evident. If a slide cannot stand on its own, or if its justification is not apparent, the photographer should view it in solitude.

And probably will.

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The following bibliography is a condensed version of an extensive listing (275 citations) relating to audiovisual aids, photography, picture composition, slides and photographs for teaching, and production and presentation of slides and slide shows. The original bibliography has been entered as follows into the ERIC system: Galt, Alan. Slides and the Foreign Language Teacher: A Bibliography. FL 008 351. The corresponding ED number can be found in the cross-reference list that appears at the end of each monthly issue of Resources in Education.

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